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ABSTRACT

Many students now entering college have read so little as to be classed "preliterate," making the problems of teaching the classics of narrative fiction complex. An analysis of the relationship between reading and speech implies that students must begin in childhood with a rich oral culture; those who have been strangers to discourse are not likely to become readers. Because our oral culture has been vitiated by the widespread use of language to inform and persuade, rather than to delight and invoke magic, we lack a common store of folktales and a common mythology. Yet, college students are still responsive to the spoken word, greedy for narrative, and susceptible to enchantment; they can be reached by the instructor telling stories aloud or by reading from sources such as ancient mythology, the Book of Genesis, and the Brothers Grimm. The assumption is that in following the speaker's images and turns of phrase, tone of voice, and narrative thread, the listener engages in the imaginative interplay that leads to literacy. (CC)

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RELITERACY IN A POSTLITERATE AGE

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There was a time when words were a precious commodity. Some thousand years ago, heroes in Old English poems would "unlock their word hoard" to dispense the treasure of their speech, a gift as valuable as rings and armor. Language was growing, then, and continued to flourish, fed, for centuries, by the movement of peoples, by population growth, by literacy, by print and its accelerating technology. Today, on the contrary, (I quote George Steiner), "we are passing out of an era of verbal primacy...into a phase of decayed language, of 'post-linguistic' forms and, perhaps, of partial silence....The world of words has shrunk."¹

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Our most sophisticated current fiction is anti-fiction. It is elliptic, self-parodying, non-communicating, resolutely postliterate. At the same time, however, our least sophisticated audiences--the students who enter our colleges--have read so little as to have remained preliterate. From both extremes we hear the sounds of silence. And as professors of literature, charged with transmitting to the next generation a beloved and superabundant accumulation of texts, we enter the classroom rather like Beckett's Mr. Watt, who discovers, on coming to the house of Mr. Knott, that the objects there no longer "consent to be named, with the time-honored names."²

The problem of teaching even the classics of narrative fiction to preliterate students is complex, and I can offer no simple solutions. Here, I will only analyze and suggest. In doing so, I shall confine myself to one aspect of preliteracy, namely, that of the relationship between reading and speech.

The written word is built on the support structure of a well-functioning oral culture. The sound and feel of words, the habits of listening and of colloquy, provide the only entrance to the magic gardens of print. People who have been strangers to discourse are not likely to become readers.

The reader of a novel is its performer. In What Is Literature? Jean-Paul Sartre writes that the literary object is led into being through the reader's subjectivity. Although the author guides him, "the landmarks he sets are separated by the void. The reader must unite them; he must go beyond them. Reading is directed creation."³ Similarly, the German critic Gerhard Storz has written about the cooperative venture of author and reader, characterizing it as a Zusammenspiel--the word means both interplay and partnership in a game--in which the reader completes the configuration suggested by the writer's sketchy indications.⁴

This game of directed creation needs learning; and to learn it, one had best begin in childhood with an actual model of the narrative paradigm, of speaker and hearer weaving the tale between them. Together on solid ground, speaker and hearer manage to transport themselves to secondary and tertiary spaces, to anywhere, to anytime. Later on, in solitary reading, the narrative paradigm is internalized. The teller-listener

frame, no longer consciously noticed now, has become integrated in the reading situation.

Novelists have frequently toyed with the encounter of speaker and hearer in their works. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, for example, is a construction of narrative envelopes. The outer shell of the book--meeting ground of author and reader--is only a container for the correspondence of a certain Captain Walton with his sister; Walton's letters, in turn, report the spoken confession of his dying guest, the scientist-experimenter Frankenstein; and Frankenstein's account contains the five-chapter narration of his unhappy monster; finally, the monster's narrative encapsulates the chronicle of a happy little family from whom, by spying through a chink in the cottage wall, he has learned to speak and to read.

As a lesson in literacy, by the way, the monster's story is remarkable. After a few solitary months spent ear to the wall, listening to his neighbors' tales and conversations, readings and songs, he seizes a copy of Paradise Lost and greedily deciphers it from start to finish, later adding Plutarch's Lives and The Sorrows of Werther: The spoken word has made him literate; it takes reading to make him human.

The symbiosis of speech and literature is, in fact, immanent in the verb to read. There is, first of all, a far-flung relationship between the Middle English form of the verb, reden, and the German reden, meaning to speak. Moreover, "the original senses of the Teutonic word," the OED informs us, "are those of taking or giving counsel." This idea of taking or giving,

of mutually interchangeable roles, is central to the concept of reading. Even today, a reader can be either one who teaches or one who learns. What is more, common idiom allows the text itself to read (in the sense in which one says "it reads well," or "it reads quickly"). The very word, then, encourages us to conceive of each literary text as an active joining of voices: author, reader, and book--all speak. Lionel Trilling (echoing a remark by W. H. Auden) wrote in his essay on teaching modern literature, "a real book reads us. I have been read by Eliot's poems and by Ulysses and by Remembrance of Things Past and by The Castle for a good many years now, since early youth."⁵

In the nineteenth century, when print culture was at the height of esteem, and literacy synonymous with civilization, novels promoted the sense of a consequential encounter between author and reader. Indeed, the central character often functioned as the mutual friend who brought them together. This is certainly alluded to by Dickens' choice of the title Our Mutual Friend, for a novel in which literacy is an important theme. In this work characters are not only read to and taught to read, they also read--and are read by--one another.

When oral culture fades, literature grows sickly. Today, we continue to speak and to read, of course. But speakers have other aims, and listeners different expectations. Words have lost their incantatory magic, and they have yielded their primacy to pictures. In public and private places, in every store, bank, and restaurant, speech is drowned by relentless quasi-musical noise. Language is used far less to narrate than

to inform and to persuade. Literature now reaches students through textbooks and manuals, suggesting that it is meant to teach them how to do something useful and profitable. We are working in the era of behavioral objectives.

With the death of an oral culture comes the absence of a common store of folktales and a common mythology. How many references and allusions are no longer intelligible to most young college students! Our folklore is composed of purchasing myths, and the giant cargo cult of our society is promoted by the glad tidings of the communications industry. Certain words which seemed so vigorous during the 'sixties--the rock and drug vocabulary of the counterculture--bloomed monstrously and wilted fast. Moreover, the twenty minute television plot has changed the viewer's sense of timing. And Popeye the Sailor, static from year to year, forever embattled, frozen in perpetual crisis, tells children that nothing changes and only the rush of adrenalin counts. Whatever does not belong to action, becomes extraneous.

One might suppose that so many obstacles to genuine literacy must have done permanent damage to young people's ability to empathize, abstract, and imagine. But my experience does not bear this out. Instead of having become distorted, the imaginative faculty of many young adults remains dormant and ready to be engaged like that of small children. They are responsive to the spoken word, eager for personal contact with the speaker, greedy for narrative, and susceptible to enchantment. It is quite possible to find a class of eighteen-year-olds who have

barely heard of Troy. But if we start to tell them about Leda and the Swan, and the egg that bore those two sets of twins, and the beauty contest among three goddesses, and the abduction of Helen, we are likely to find that each time we stop, questions from the class will lead us on and on. These young people of the twentieth century are not nearly sophisticated enough for the literature of their own time. They must go back to beginnings, and traverse, in giant steps, many ages of fiction before arriving at an understanding of anti-fiction. They must become literate to some degree, before hoping to understand the phenomenon of postliteracy.

Schools have taken over many functions of the home. I see us forced to supply in the classroom, some of the elements missing from the students' earlier experience. I suggest, first of all, that we banish, for a time, all canned materials--all recordings, films, slides, strips, and tapes--and take delight in the simplicity of the impoverished classroom. There let us hear the instructor's voice telling, or reading, from many possible sources: the Book of Genesis, the Brothers Grimm, the Odyssey.

Of course I know that for some decades now it has been considered good classroom practice to minimize the voice of the instructor in order to maximize the voices of students. At Teachers College, in the 'Sixties, lecturing was the cardinal offense. To be caught telling the class something instead of eliciting it by a series of questions, earned one poor grades

in student teaching. All one's ingenuity was bent towards setting in motion the supreme, the ultimately-to-be-desired educational event--group discussion.

Lately, many of us have found that the so-called discovery method, applied this way, has not served us well. Nor can students discuss what they have never learned. And besides, like Mary Shelley's monster, they must first hear before they can either speak or read.

I make the assumption that there is no such thing as passive listening, and that in following the speaker's images and turns of phrase, tone of voice and narrative thread, the listener engages in the imaginative interplay that leads to literacy. If all this sounds too much like nursery school (for it is, in fact, a remedial procedure), one should bear in mind that tales such as that of Genesis, for example, are inseparable from the entire fabric of Western culture. Therefore, after the story has been read, it is natural that a group of young adults should go on to examine what makes it remarkable, memorable, and universal.

But the semester is brief, and soon the class must turn to books. Because the individual students' responses will have to parallel the historical development of the literary genre (ontogeny having to catch up with phylogeny), it would be preferable if introductory textbooks on literature--even those not intended for survey courses--would relinquish the arrangement of their material in a kind of thematic jumble, and return to chronological

order. Chronology helps convey to students a general sense of literary development, and allows a historical approach to some of the more puzzling phenomena of modernism..

It is to be recommended, also, that exercises and questions, the so-called "apparatus" of pedagogy, be kept at a distance from the text, well hidden in the back of the book, perhaps. For, needless to say, the textbook as medium carries all too loud a message.

There remain, troubling to the mind, two questions which students recurrently ask. Number one: "What do we have to study literature for?" My answer: We study literature, as we study all phenomena, out of curiosity. Because it exists. Because if we don't study it, it will be lost. Number two: "What is the writer trying to say?" My answer: The writer is not trying to say, but is saying. In the act of saying, he, or she, more nearly resembles the Ancient Mariner, grabbing us by the arm because his story drives him to tell it, than the solution pusher we meet in books and journals, on radio and TV, who proposes to train us, save us, cure us, make us rich, slender, sexy, terrific at tennis, or forever young.

These few suggestions for introducing young adults to literature will not produce remarkable changes. Only a renewal of language could do that. Perhaps, though, as populations stop growing, and economies contract, and fuel shortages inhibit travel, people will turn once more to each other for the consolations and pleasures of the spoken word. Anyway, it is a possibility.

NOTES

¹Language and Silence (1967; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 13, 45.

²Watt (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 84.

³(1949; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 39.

⁴"Zusammenspiel zwischen Erzähler und Leser," Probleme des Erzählens in der Weltliteratur, ed. Fritz Martini (Stuttgart: Klett, 1971).

⁵"On the Teaching of Modern Literature," in Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning (New York: Viking, 1955), p. 8.